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EDITORIALS

Justice and the butcher

The Justice Department report on Klaus Barbie gets its conclusions right. It was indefensible for U.S. intelligence agents to hire Barbie in 1947, protect him from the French and let him escape to Bolivia. We owe France an apology. But the report falls smack into the same moral swamp.

Barbie's employers claimed that they thought he merely fought the French Resistance during World War II and that they didn't know he also deported Jewish children to the east. They did know he was Gestapo commandant in Lyon, but judged it unimportant. And Allan Ryan, who wrote the report, accepts the argument.

No one in Europe—and few here—will agree. The Gestapo was a wholly evil organization. To anyone except the invincibly ignorant, or morally insensitive, all Gestapo officers are guilty until proved innocent and no one can deal with them without being contaminated.

Ryan wrote: "Resistance fighters were not in the same category as innocent victims of the Holocaust; they were combatants in the same category as soldiers." He seems to think the Gestapo obeyed the Geneva conventions, as a decent and honorable occupying force.

But it didn't. Barbie's police discovered a meeting of the National Resistance Council, and Barbie himself tortured to death its leader, Jean Moulin, the greatest hero of the Resistance. That's why Barbie was wanted in France.

As war criminals go, he's nothing special. He was the Butcher of Lyon, but there was a Gestapo butcher in every occupied city. Still, it's horrifying to discover that two years after the war there were Americans who already had forgotten.

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